December 3, 1751
(2:30 in the afternoon)

This scene depicts an early winter Cree and Assiniboin camp in the Assiniboine River valley about AD 1750. Three families have been here for a couple of weeks; a fourth family has just arrived. Mother and her sister are putting up the tipi, while the daughter has gone to gather wood. Father and his brothers-in-law have just arrived with a freshly killed elk. Grandfather is telling a story to his grandsons, who were too impatient to wait until evening to hear the stories that are told only in winter.

The 1700's were a time of change for these people. They had been trading with Europeans for almost a century, and many items, including iron knives, copper pots, and cloth had been added to their traditional culture. The Assiniboin were just beginning to obtain horses from the Mandan people of present-day North Dakota. The Cree, armed with guns, were beginning to move south from the northern forests onto the plains. With guns and horses, the allied Assiniboin and Cree were to become the dominant force on the Saskatchewan plains for the next century.

Tipi Camps

In winter, Plains Indians lived in small camps in sheltered valleys or within the southern edge of the parkland. These wintering sites were well-established, semi-permanent settlements. Much of the day was devoted to teaching and story-telling.

Wood was used for heating throughout the winter. Deer, elk, rabbit, the occasional bison, and pemmican were the main foods.

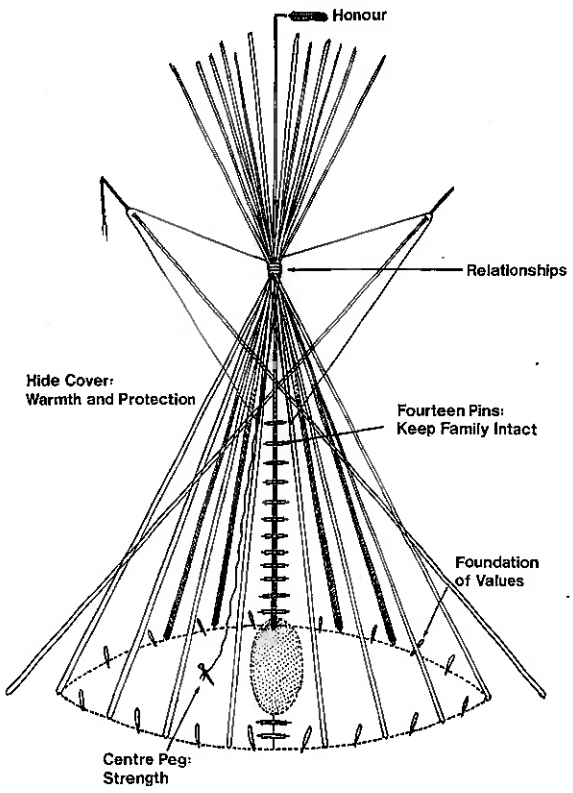
In summer, the people moved to the open plains to hunt bison and collect plants for food and other uses. At least once during the summer, they joined together in large groups--at times over 5000 people--for a month or so. They organized large communal bison hunts and conducted ceremonies.

Tipi Rings

Tipis have been used on the Plains for 6000 years or more. Stone circles mark the sites of these ancient camps.

The Tipi as Home

Tipis provided a comfortable and portable home year-round. They withstood prairie gales, and kept their occupants warm and dry throughout the year. They were warm in winter and cool in summer.



The Poles Represent:

1. Obedience
2. Respect
3. Humility
4. Happiness
5. Love
6. Faith
7. Kinship
8. Cleanliness
9. Thankfulness
10. Sharing
11. Strength
12. Good Child Rearing
13. Hope

The Tipi as Symbol

Each part of the tipi--the poles, the cover, the pins, and the pegs--plays an important role to ensure that the structure holds together and functions as it should.

Each element of the tipi symbolizes a moral principle of Indian society. These principles must be respected and followed if the family, and ultimately society, are to hold together and function in harmony.

Wi-sa-ke-cahk and the Ducks

This story which I'm going to tell happened long ago and shows how things came to be.

This man Wi-sa-ke-cahk was the eldest brother to one and all, everywhere.

Child: Grandfather, how is it that Wi-sa-ke-cahk was able to talk to the birds?

At that, time everyone understood each other because only one language was in use. Like the moose, all sorts of animals, and all sorts of ducks, all understood human beings. Okay, then and there...

Okay, as usual Wi-sa-ke-cahk was walking along, carrying a bag, taking care of the world and wondering how he could catch some ducks to eat. He had not yet devised a plan that would work. Every time he'd approach the ducks and geese, all varieties of waterfowl, really, they'd run from him.

"Get away! As usual our older brother is up to something. Go far from shore! Go far from shore! Run away!" they warned each other. And so it was he'd not have much luck.

"Okay, so how am I going to trick my younger siblings?" thought Wi-sa-ke-cahk. Finally, he thought of a plan which just might work.

He began to gather up moss to put into his bag. After the bag was full, he bundled it up, put it over his shoulder, and continued walking.

"Ho! Our older brother has something. What is our older brother carrying?"

"Hey! Let's ask him. Hey! Older brother! Older brother! What are you carrying?"

"Ho! Younger siblings, what I'm carrying is the Shut-eye Dance!" he told them, putting his plan into action.

"All right! Please, show us how it's done."